

Work Out Your Salvation | Philippians 2:12-18

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(Small Group Discussion Questions on Page 7)

If you have a bible, turn to Philippians 2:12-18, it can be found on page 981 in the blue church bibles, please turn there so that you can follow along with me, to make sure what I am saying is trustworthy and true. For God's word is our authority, not me.

As you do that, I am going to begin our time by praying.
Let's pray.

Introduction

How many times have you looked back on your life and thought, ahh now I see what God was doing in my life?

The idea that hindsight is 20/20 is never more accurate than when you see God's sovereign power working in your life directing your every step.

Even though you made decisions, you took actions, you put in a lot of work to make something happen, you can look back and see that God had his hand in every part of it.

I know that to be true, without any shadow of a doubt, of my coming to stand in this pulpit today. A kid who grew up in small town Australia, who never dreamed of becoming a preacher, or living anywhere other than the greatest country in the world, I'm still talking about Australia.

It is only through God working, as I faithfully trusted in him, that I now live and work in Falls Church, Virginia. I had no idea this place existed, for the first 30 years of my life. But I am so thankful to God that I and my family are here now. That he was directing me, in every aspect of my life, to bring us here.

Context

If you have just joined us this week, welcome! We are glad you are here. We have been working our way through the book of Philippians, a letter the Apostle Paul wrote in prison, to the Christians in Philippi.

We have seen over the past few weeks, how Paul is grateful to God for the partnership in the gospel he has with the Philippians. Also, that despite his circumstances, Paul's vision for life has been reorganized around God's priorities. And last week, we heard about what it means to live a life worthy of the gospel.

As we come to our passage in chapter 2, just before our verses, Paul has instructed the Philippians that they are to have the same attitude as Jesus.

The attitude of humbly coming to serve us, by dying on the cross for us, so that we might one day come before his throne in worship, confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the father.

Therefore, as Paul says, it is in light of this reality—the death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Jesus—that Paul continues to develop this topic of living a life worthy of the gospel.

He does this in three ways that I want to highlight from the text this morning,

#1 – Our Work

#2 – Salvation’s work

#3 – God’s work.

We have work to do. Salvation does a work in us. And ultimately, God is at work in us. So, let’s look at that first point, “our work”.

1. Point 1 – Our Work

In verse 12, Paul calls the Philippians to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. Let’s look at verses 12 and 13 of chapter 2 again.

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

This is nothing new for them. They have a good track record of being obedient followers of Jesus. But now that Paul is absent from them, they should continue on in obedience by working out their salvation.

In order to work out what Paul means here, we need to be clear on what he is not saying.

He is not saying that you need to work for your salvation.

He is not saying there is work that we need to do in order to earn salvation.

Because that is not consistent with the rest of this letter, or the rest of the New Testament.

Paul is writing to those who are already saved. We see this in chapter 1 verse 1, where he calls them saints. He also calls them partners in the gospel, and fellow partakers of grace. It is clear that the Philippians have already been saved, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. They do not need to work for their salvation.

So, Paul is not saying we work for our salvation. What he is saying is that we are to work out the salvation we have already received, by grace through faith in Jesus.

In the preceding verses, Paul presents a great vision of the future. A vision of when all of creation, all of the world, and every single person in heaven and on earth will bow before Jesus and confess that he is the king.

It is a powerful, beautiful, and joyful vision of our future salvation. A time when everything will be made right, when all people, and all things, will be redeemed and reconciled back to God.

But our salvation is not only a future hope.
It is a powerful present reality.
It is not only something that happens then,
It is also for right now!

Jesus has died for your sins, and you have already been forgiven for you sins.
You have been freed from the curse, penalty, and demands of the law.
You have been given the Holy Spirit dwelling in you right now!

In saying “work out your own salvation” Paul is essentially saying don't wait until a future day to start living out your faith.
Be Christians right now!

Let the good news of God's grace begin to infiltrate your life, right now.
Let his grace, by his Spirit, change your habits, re-order your desires,
change your family agenda, transform your vision for your life, modify your priorities for work.
Paul says exercise your salvation right now!

[Illustration - Waiting for My Real Life to Begin.](#)

In my late teens, my friend and I had a song that really resonated with our brooding personalities, which we would often talk about. It was by Colin Hay, and it was called “Waiting for my real life to begin”.

We would talk about this feeling we had of, as the song says, waiting for our real life to begin. What that meant, and what that real life looked like, we had no idea! But we knew that there was something more real in our future. That there was something so much better than what we were experiencing.

The problem we faced was while we were waiting for that “real life” to begin, we let our actual life slip through our fingers. We were so convinced that our real life was coming later, that we didn't enjoy, we didn't really live our life in the present. We missed out on a lot of what life had to offer us at that age, because we were too busy waiting for something more satisfying to come along.

I think this is similar to what Paul is saying to the Philippians, and to you and me. Don't be so fixated on the goodness of eternal life in the future, that you miss out on the splendor of eternal life at work in you now.

Our real life, our salvation, is now! So spiritually exercise it; work it out as Paul says.

This is to be done with fear and trembling, Paul says. Not because we need to be afraid of God's judgement or his wrath. Jesus has taken that upon himself and dealt with it for us. But because such respect and seriousness are entirely appropriate when we are talking about obedience to the one true and living God.

2. Point 2 – Salvation's Work

What does that look like for you and me?

What does it mean for salvation to be worked out in us?

Thankfully, Paul doesn't leave us to our own devices to try to figure it out.

He explains it to us in verses 14 through 16.

Let's look at those verses again,

¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or disputing, ¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶ holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

Did you see it there? Verse 14, do all things without grumbling or disputing.

Ok wow. That is pretty big. Just the thought of that, makes me want to grumble against Paul. All things? Really Paul?

But what about taxes? Or final exams? What about family gatherings? What about meaningless meetings that really could have just been an email? Surely, you don't mean the DMV? Paul if you could just experience the DMV surely you wouldn't mean all things?

All things!

This all-encompassing call to obedience shows us that the grace of God is not meant just for one part of our lives. Our salvation is meant to be worked out—exercised—in every area of our lives.

In particular, Paul is talking about church unity. And he singles out grumbling and disputing, as he focuses in on the body of Christ in Philippi.

If you have been in church for any amount of time, you may be thinking this is an impossible task. Churches have division over any number of things. The color of the carpet, the style of music, the translation of the bible they use, just to name a few. I am sure you know of other examples.

Just to be clear, this does not mean that we do not disagree on things. Disagreement can be healthy. And it is perfectly fine to disagree on the things that are of lesser importance.

But what Paul has in mind here is the grumbling and disputing that causes dissension and division. It takes the form of whispering complaints, talking negatively about someone behind their back, and general negative murmur.¹

Paul gives the reason for this instruction in verse 15, where he says that the way we speak about each other, and to each other, directly relates to our witness to the outside world. It is not just the way that we act towards outsiders, but the way we relate to each other, also has an impact on our witness to the world around us. Our unity or division, can make us shine brighter or dimmer to those around us.

Illustration – Israelites in the Wilderness

Paul is alluding to the Israelites who grumbled in the wilderness. In Deuteronomy 32, Moses speaks to the Israelites and tells them that because of their grumbling in the wilderness, they have become blemished, *“they are a crooked and twisted generation.”*

God’s chosen people, the Israelites, had become slaves in Egypt, which was not the land God had promised to them. They cried out to God, and he rescued them. Bringing them through the red sea. Saving them from the Egyptian army.

But despite God’s amazing work of salvation, which echoes throughout the rest of the Bible. Despite God’s miraculous intervention, the Israelites begin to grumble because they don’t trust that God is with them in the wilderness as they journey to the land he promised. They grumble and dispute with Moses, why did you bring us out here? Was it to kill us? Life was so much better when we were slaves in Egypt, at least we had food to eat.

I don’t even need to be in the wilderness to face the same temptation to grumble against God and my neighbor. I can’t even count how many times I caught myself grumbling this week, as Paul’s words rolled around in my head.

So, how do we guard against grumbling and disputing?
How do we stay blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation?
How do we shine as lights in the world?
Paul explains in verse 16.
By holding fast to the word of life.

Just like we saw last week. Our best offense comes through having a good defense. By holding firmly to the truth of the gospel. The word that brings life.

We do this through praying to God and reading his word, the Bible. This is why we read and preach from the bible every week. This is why we have small groups throughout the week that gather around God’s word. If you haven’t already, I encourage you to join one. I would also encourage you to find a mentor or friend that you

¹ G. Walter Hansen, [The Letter to the Philippians](#), The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 179.

read the Bible and pray with one-to-one, and, as you are able, make time to read the bible and pray to God by yourself.

That sounds like a lot, and you might not be able to do all of it. But it is vitally important for your spiritual health and the health of this body, that you hold firm to the word of life!

This is salvation's work in our lives, when through conviction and repentance we turn away from grumbling and disputing, turning away from evil, and turning to Christ. Having our hearts and minds, fixed on him, holding fast to him.

3. Point 3 – God's Work

The good news of all this is back in verses 12-13. Listen to those verses again:

"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

The life of Christian obedience is not something we do in our own strength, it happens by the sovereign power of God working in us.

Paul is not saying 'God has played his part, now it is up to you to take over'. He is not saying 'Ok, you can take it from here.' As though it now all depends on you.

He's also not saying 'Look, God has got it all sorted. You can just sit back relax, kick your feet up, and enjoy the ride to eternal bliss.'

No, "work out your own salvation . . . because God is the one working in us." He works in us at every level, in every part of our being. It is God all the way down.

His power and our responsibility are not at odds with one another.

<Pause>

Paul has no problem with mentioning them in the same sentence.

God's work in our lives is an incentive to press on, to put our heads down, and work out what God has already worked in us by his Holy Spirit.

This is such good news to hear. The creator of all things in heaven and on earth, is at work in me. The same God who raised Jesus from the dead, dwells within me and is laboring in every area of my life.

Notice the work he is doing in us.

He is working, *"both to will and to work for his good pleasure."*

God is not forming me into the best version of what I think of myself. He is not coming alongside *my* will and *my* desires, and thinking to himself 'you know what, you want to be rich and famous, that sounds like a pretty good idea, let me make that happen for you.'

God is not working for the desires of our own hearts. But he is reshaping, reworking our will and our hearts, so that we would be more and more like him.

As he does this work in us, we become less divisive, more united with one another, and we shine ever more brightly as lights in the world.

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we have much work to do, that salvation might be worked out among us. But the good news is, God is the one who is powerfully at work in us, by his Holy Spirit, to will and to work for his good pleasure.

So, my prayer for us is that God would indeed do this work in us!
That each one of us might work out our own salvation, with fear and trembling.
That our lives might more and more be shaped into the image of our savior, Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite songs says it much better than I ever could. You might know it, it is called "Take my life and let it be". It was written in the 1800s by Frances R. Havergal. The last two verses say this,

⁵ Take my will and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart it is thine own;
it shall be thy royal throne.

⁶ Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee,
ever, only, all for thee.

Father, let it be so. Amen!

Discussion Questions

1. What is stopping you from exercising your faith, working out your own salvation?
2. What are some things that cause you to grumble or dispute?
3. How might we individually and corporately as a church continue to hold firm to the word of life?
4. How does our unity or division impact our witness?
5. How can we know our will is being changed into God's will, for his good pleasure?